Doing Systems Thinking
March 2016
Introducing some concepts

- What is a system – purpose and boundary.
- Primary task.
- Unconscious processes.
- Complexity and non-linearity.
What is a system

• System refers to a group of activities that take place within a boundary. So a system might be for example a team, a department, a patient pathway, an organisation.

• A boundary enables differentiation from other systems. It is possible to communicate, collaborate, connect and compete across boundaries. Equally it is possible to attack, defend, cut off and stagnate within a boundary.

• A system has a purpose and every activity within the system contributes to that purpose. (Or not!)

• The purpose of the system relates to 'why'. Why the system exists, in this it is inextricably linked to context.

(Roberts and Bazalgette 2005)
Context

- Context can be understood as existing at different levels and can shift depending on the focus of attention or discussion.

- Context can mean for example the organisation, a local neighbourhood, the health service, the prison service or society.

(Roberts and Bazalgette 2005)
Person

• The domain of person is linked to desire.

• It is about what gives us energy.

• What makes us want to connect with others to make a difference.

(Roberts and Bazalgette 2005)
Role

- Role refers to behaviour and action. It is shaped by your inner picture of yourself as Person (including desire), of the Context (including the resources that derive from it) and of the System (including its Purpose).

- In role as an OD professional you use your feelings and experience in each domain as evidence on which to base your choice of action.

- Role is defined as ‘disciplined behaviour which furthers the purpose of the system in its context’. Thus, being an effective OD professional requires you to integrate your experience from each of these domains and then act purposefully on this evidence.

(Roberts and Bazalgette 2005)
(Roberts and Bazalgette 2005)
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The task and the sentient system

The task system
Those rational aspects of role wherein others’ conscious expectations are built and the individual overtly works the role.

The sentient system
Social, human process: the symbols, meanings, unconscious group forces, emotional significance experienced and attitudes and beliefs based on the needs, fantasies and patterns of identification for an individual, within a role and an organization.
Heuristic: "Εὑρίσκω", "find" or "discover") refers to experience-based techniques for problem solving, learning, and discovery that give a solution which is not guaranteed to be optimal. Where the exhaustive search is impractical, heuristic methods are used to speed up the process of finding a satisfactory solution via mental shortcuts to ease the cognitive load of making a decision. Examples of this method include using a rule of thumb, an educated guess, an intuitive judgment, stereotyping, or common sense. In more precise terms, heuristics are strategies using readily accessible, though loosely applicable, information to control problem solving in human beings and machines.
Above the surface: behaviours, what we see / hear

Below the surface
The unconscious

This is the part of our mind and self we don’t know about. It contains our earliest experiences, and our most primitive impulses.

Mostly there is no need to know about it. However, it is our unconscious which drives us and dictates how we feel, and if we have some internal conflict which troubles our unconscious, it will dictate how we behave- even though we might consciously wish to behave quite differently.

Everyone has one, and has this experience from time to time.

Individuals have an unconscious. This approach to thinking about systems developed by The Tavistock Institute contends that group and systems also have an unconscious life.
Defence mechanisms

Unconscious psychological strategies adopted in response to various triggers to cope with reality, maintain self image and protect self esteem.

They are triggered when individuals or groups are:
- Anxious
- Uncertain
- Threatened
- Vulnerable
Bion’s Work Group and Basic Assumption Group

The Work Group
- The group is overtly working to solve a problem or complete a task.
- Members know what the task is and can name it.
- Members respect and accept one another.
- Leadership and other roles shift depending upon the demands of the task.
- Members use dialogue and reflection to communicate and enhance learning.
- Group produces solutions and products of high quality and usefulness.

(Stokes in Obholzer & Roberts 1994)
Basic assumption behaviour

- When caught up in basic assumption behaviour, group members lose their critical faculties and individual abilities.
- Trivial matters are discussed endlessly, as if they were a matter of life or death.
- There is little capacity to bear frustration, and quick solutions are favoured.
- Group has lost its capacity to stay in touch with reality and its demands.

(Stokes in Obholzer & Roberts 1994)

Group Dynamics

Wilfred Bion (1961) made the case for thinking about human groups and group behaviour beyond the Freudian idea of the family as being the prototype, using concepts, developed by Melanie Klein, to identify of the main emotional drives in the group. Bion describes group functioning on two levels: rational and conscious, where groups operate as sophisticated or work groups, and instinctive and unconscious, where groups engage in three types of basic assumption behaviour: dependency, fight-flight and pairing. This regressive behaviour occurs when groups are unable to maintain their task because of primitive emotional experiences such as anxiety, fear, hatred and love.

The Work Group: groups of individuals meet together to 'do' something. Individuals need to cooperate in order for the group to do this. This requires some degree of sophisticated skill in the individual, which is dependent on the capacity to learn from experience. The mental activity of the work group is task oriented and related to reality; methods are rational and scientific.

The Basic Assumptions: work group functioning is interrupted by three basic assumption behaviours common to all people in a group. Miller (1997), best describes this: “In fight/flight the group behaves as if its purpose is to identify an external enemy or threat, which is has either to attack or to flee from. In dependency the group behaves as if it expects to be fed and nurtured by an omniscient leader. In
pairing, the third basic assumption, the emotional state of the group is one of expectancy and hope. Typically all attention is focused on two members of the group...their pairing will produce the future leader, the messiah who will provide salvation.”
Basic assumptions

Dependency
› *I think we can rely on you to sort this out and look after us*
› *You will know what to do*
› *This feels nice (for us)*
› *How disappointing for us (you will have to go...whose next?)*

Pairing
› *I know its difficult now but something will happen to make it ok in the future*

Fight/flight
› *It's time to attack or retreat*
› *We know the common enemy*

(Stokes in Obholzer & Roberts 1994)
### Different paradigms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanistic (technical)</th>
<th>Living (complex)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tame</strong></td>
<td><strong>Wicked</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>stable</td>
<td>unpredictable</td>
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<tr>
<td>unambiguous</td>
<td>multiple perspectives</td>
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<td>predictable, linear change</td>
<td>iterative innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solutions/knowledge is known</td>
<td>solutions/knowledge is discovered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the parts matter</td>
<td>the relationships matter</td>
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New science ideas are drawn from.....

Key ideas are:

• Human systems are living systems – therefore complex unpredictable and constantly changing

• Relationships matter - Bell and Aspect experiment a critical discovery – ie the way in which living systems adapt and evolve is determined by the way the interconnected parts relate to each other as well as by the way the individual parts behave.

• The notion of synergy therefore becomes significant ie the idea that the sum is greater than the parts.

• and that when you shift attention from the parts to the whole the picture changes from a simple linear combination of parts to a whole new shape in which the connections between the parts are ever changing and evolving, this means that the emerging shape cant be predicted but evolves as each new connection alters the shape of the whole.
• In this kind of paradigm therefore, the separate parts are less important and understanding the connections and linkages between the parts really matters.
Implications for OD professionals

- Ask yourself some different questions:
  - What might be going on beneath the surface for different parts of the system?
  - What is the primary task? What task do people appear to be attending to?
  - What about issues of boundary, role, authority?
- Broker relationships and connections - see difference, contradictions and multiple perspectives as helpful.
- Accept that there is no ultimate truth; only multiple, possible next steps.
- Start anywhere and notice what happens.
- Notice patterns; search for hidden assumptions and meaning.
- Develop hypotheses and test them.

3. Start anywhere etc. – the system patterns will be repeated and renacted everywhere in the system so does matter where you start trying to change it, the patterns will be determined by the guiding principles on which the system is based.
Further reading


